One

Dead, or almost. A daffodil, brown around the edges and its stem bowing under the weight of the blossom, jailed behind a black iron fence in the tiny garden by St. Anselm's. I walk by here practically every day on my way to Verducci's, and I hadn't seen this flower. Strangely solitary: how often do you see just one daffodil? If it is already fading, probably it has been there all week and I didn't notice. Another couple of days and there would have been nothing to see. I would just have missed spring altogether—the way you can, year after year, on this ark of stone.

As a girl in Baltimore I watched the world open up each spring, the flowers taking their turn in an order as fixed as a royal progress: crocus, daffodil, tulip, violet, dogwood, azalea. Why am I not there, what inertia has held me in New York all these years? Why not a little house back in Roland Park, with a porch from which I can watch spring unfold and—

I am filled with dread. A sudden shadow, the flowers cut off from the sun. I shake it off. I think I know what the shadow is about, the knot inside me. There will be a spring, soon enough, when the flowers will come and I will not see them. I shake it off.

On my way home people glance at me, look quickly away: a dotty old woman holding a dead daffodil. It didn't feel like larceny, freeing a withered flower from its cage. I am going to paint it. Funny, people never paint dead flowers. Why not? A flower is wilted much longer than it's fresh, a patient and untiring model.

I'm going to sit in the room that was my son Mickey's and paint a dead flower. Something I have not shaken off.

I didn't get rid of Mickey's things all at once.

A few weeks after Mickey was killed, our friend Laurence helped me get a cookbook job. They only needed the jacket and some whimsical sketches for the chapter headings. Minueting chickens for Poultry, a classroom of baby cheeses learning their ABCs: Appenzeller, Brie, Camembert. Just a little commission, but it was the first work I'd had since—

Since Mickey was born. I'd stopped work to have Mickey; he was gone; I was back at work. I suppose Laurence meant to distract me. Instead he had inadvertently reminded me that Mickey's life had been so negligible I could squeeze it between parentheses. I was (except while Mickey lived) an illustrator. It wasn't Laurence's fault: nothing happened then or for months after that didn't remind me Mickey was gone.

And if I didn't forget, still it was a comfort to take up again the steel pen, dip it in the Pelikan black, hold my wrist taut but not tense, and feel the ink flow into the paper, not onto it, into the incision shallow and fine as a capillary I made with each smooth stroke.

I started working at the dining room table, but the light was no good and my husband Jonathan kept interrupting me. A million things: where were his cigarettes, did we have any stamps, he had snarled up his typewriter ribbon again. He wouldn't have interrupted if I had been washing the dishes or cleaning the toilet. On the contrary: in the weeks since we'd heard about Mickey he had scarcely spoken to me, just lurked around the house as if auditioning for the part of Mickey's ghost. But the minute I started drawing he was omnipresent, not just talking to me but *looking*.

I said, "Imagine if I looked over your shoulder while you typed!"

"Wouldn't bother me," he said. "Is there any coffee left?"

Wouldn't bother him. The man bolted his study door when he worked, and at the end of the day he stuffed his papers into a locked file cabinet. I didn't say this, just angrily gathered up my bristol boards and my pens. And found myself at Mickey's desk.

I hadn't gone into his room much. Jonathan did, practically every day he would go in and close the door and emerge some minutes later. At first I thought he was crying or maybe even praying, if he remembered how. He told me once that, when his mother died, he was supposed to go to temple every day for eleven months and recite the Kaddish. A six-year-old trudging in before school and praying with the old men who smelled of cigars and death. He lasted just a week or two, until one bright morning he walked right by. Maybe now he was catching up: the unnatural paradox of a father reciting the prayer for his son.

One day I saw, as Jonathan emerged, that he was clutching a hand towel. I wanted to say, You slimy, randy old . . . Then I thought, it's not a big apartment, we haven't space for a shrine, somebody might as well use the room.

Now I took it over. I started drawing at Mickey's desk, but that wasn't working. I needed a real drawing board. So one afternoon while Jonathan was out I got a neighbor to help me lug the desk down to the street, while the knickknacks that had been on it went to the closet. By next morning the desk had vanished, in that magical New York way, as if elves had got it.

Then I needed a couple of shelves for supplies, and really there wasn't much sentimental value in Mickey's albums, Stones and Buffalo Springfield and the like, or the half-finished plastic model of a ship. The elves got them. The bedspread was dingy and, anyway, bore the logo of the New York Yankees. I got a new cover, corduroy, and while I was at it moved the bed into a corner and got some bolsters and turned it into a daybed. Now I could move the drawing board to face the window, so that I could spend the next thirty years looking at the same impudent and

amazingly hardy ailanthus tree. There was no more need for the nightstand, so instead I put in a little coffee table that was, pretty soon, covered with my books and magazines. Then I needed some room in the closet.

So Mickey was gradually erased, the detritus of ongoing life filling in the spaces he had left behind. Within a few months, he lived in the apartment only in memory, Jonathan's and mine. In another few months Jonathan, too, was gone. Now Mickey lives only in me, no one else left to attest that we hadn't just made him up.

More exactly: in me there live three Mickeys. The real one in memory, from the first time I held him in my arms to the last time he eluded my kiss. Then sometimes the completed Mickey: as a sort of comfortless game I imagine Mickey enduring, coming home from the army, making a life. This Mickey is necessarily indistinct, because I never understood what life he aimed for. The third is . . . more an unMickey, I suppose. I wonder how it would have been if he had never existed.

Which had been my plan for him.

Jonathan and I were, as we said in those days, shacking up in a one-bedroom on Charles Street—except Jonathan commandeered the bedroom, so what we really had was a studio with an office attached. Jonathan thought lofty thoughts in the bedroom, while I went off to my first grown-up job as editorial assistant at *Epicure*. In the morning I read proof or I helped try out readers' recipes—always eponymous, Veau Truffé Jones, Potage Fink. At lunch I would share the least disastrous experiments with a charming, boozy coworker who had written, I was told, a novel about an acorn pickers' strike in the thirties; now he pecked out imaginary tales of gourmandizing on the boulevards. The afternoons I spent drawing little fillers and cartouches

and, one glorious month, the cover. I would come home and cook spaghetti in the little kitchen with, yes, the bathtub in it. Jonathan and I would eat by candlelight and drink muscatel from jelly glasses.

One morning—it would have to have been in August of 1951—I was rewriting an account of some gargantuan ten-course repast served at Delmonico's in the 1890s. We ran this kind of story every couple of months, as if to reassure our readers: and you thought *you* were a piggy! I found myself getting sick to my stomach. It might have been the article, but I worried for a week and then, when my time came and went, *really* worried. A few days later, the confirmation, which back then involved the martyrdom of a rabbit.

So the third, the unMickey, started life as a touch of nausea and matured rapidly into a typewritten lab report that might as well have been headed YOUR LIFE IS OVER. I saw it all right away. Washing dirty diapers in that bathtub in the kitchen, Jonathan's office expropriated so at least we wouldn't have to sleep with the baby. The candles extinguished. Jonathan probably walking out, sooner or later, leaving me to care for the little accident alone. Martha Axelrod, Smith '50, Aid to Dependent Children '52. My life over, my exciting young city life, because maybe one night I'd had too much muscatel and Jonathan hadn't wanted to wait for the tiresome preparations caution used to entail.

I sat in my cubicle and pictured all this. I, shakily, resolved to take care of the problem. Efface the unMickey. I cannot connect the abstract entity for which I formed this dire plan and the actual Mickey. If I say now that I thought about an abortion, Mickey comes to mind; I picture someone sucking my full-sized beautiful baby out of me and flushing him away. When at the time I was more nearly picturing an intervention as bloodless as tearing up the lab report. I was a sensible girl; it was the sensible thing to do.

The sensible thing cost a lot of money, if you didn't want a butcher. I knew Jonathan didn't have any cash. At lunch I looked over at my writer friend and wondered if his proletarian epic was still paying royalties. I skimmed through my Smith yearbook, mockingly named *The Madeleine*, trying to recall if any of my friends were rich, wishing I had been just a little nicer to Bunny McCormick, the reaper heiress. I tried to write to Mom, leaving so many crumpled drafts in the wastebasket that Jonathan asked if I was trying my hand at poetry again, the smug son of a bitch. I tried to call Daddy, went down four flights to the pay phone in the front hall clutching my nickel, and then imagined my pathetic narrative echoing up the stairwell.

I went outside to the booth next to the drugstore, recited my parents' number, Tuxedo 9-6787, to the operator, declared that I was calling collect, and then burst into tears. I dropped the earpiece and stood in the booth crying, while the operator's faint voice squawked on and passersby peered in and made up stories about me. Some of them possibly accurate: surely I was acting out one of the few classic plots that end with a young woman weeping in a phone booth. I wasn't, not exactly, crying because of my predicament, or crying for the unMickey. It was the phone number, Tuxedo 9-6787, that I had given out so often to boys who wanted a date, that I had always repeated for the operator on Sunday nights when I would call home from Smith. Yes, in Baltimore, operator, that's my number.

That was my phone number, I had no other number. That was my home, and I needed to go to Baltimore and endure the clucking and we-told-you-so and let them help me, if not with an abortion then with one of those genteel boarding houses for the well-to-do knocked-up. Some pretty little place in the country operated by a genteel woman very like Mrs. Wedgwood, my housemother at Smith. At the end of my (ahem) trip abroad, the relict of my unfortunate lapse

would be whisked away, an unperson to me but a real person in the world, named by somebody else.

Then I would go home, no one the wiser, and the nice boys I had met at coming-out parties or college mixers would start calling Tuxedo 9-6787. I would marry one of them, walk down the aisle at St. David's—wearing white, no one the wiser. For all the world as if there weren't, somewhere, a child with my blue eyes and, to some poor couple's bewilderment, Jonathan Ascher's nose.

I was still in the phone booth, a little giddy in the way you can be when you've just left off blubbering. I pictured an infant with Jonathan's prodigious nose and smiled. I don't mean that I suddenly wanted that infant—it was just as naggingly inconvenient as it had been—nor that I felt any affection for Jonathan's nose or any other organ of the-man-who-got-me-in-trouble. I think I smiled at the thought that my comical hybrid could only have been begotten in New York, that I had been knocked up by a Jewish intellectual in Greenwich Village after too much muscatel. And I was not not not going to be dragged back to Baltimore, much less drag myself back.

I didn't decide to keep the baby. If the man who was waiting outside the phone booth, wearing a homburg on a sizzling August afternoon and ostentatiously checking his watch every few seconds—if he had reached in his breast pocket and thrust at me the five hundred I needed, I would probably have skipped straight off to Dr. Limbo. I only decided that what was happening, however it resolved itself, was my life. My life wasn't over, I was living it.

A couple of indecisive weeks later we had dinner at Café Lucien, in the Village. Café Lucien, with the fireplace and the candlelight and the old-fashioned entrees for two—rack of lamb, chateaubriand, it didn't matter. Sharing a hunk of meat was once a prelude to romance; taking a woman to the Lucien was, for our generation, about as brazen as a boy of today announcing to a girl that he has brought his condoms. Possibly Jonathan had some postprandial plans, but we were splurging that night because of two miraculous events.

Jonathan had finally landed a real job, a full-time lectureship at the School for Liberal Studies on Ninth Street. The SLS: Vienna West, people called it, there were so many famous refugees. Jonathan would teach comparative literature instead of drilling English into immigrants in night school. He was starting right away because somebody had dropped dead and they needed Jonathan to take over his sections. At a salary of three thousand five hundred dollars!

Then a couple of days later Jonathan's Uncle Sidney died. A cousin called with the news, we were at the building signing the lease for his apartment practically before they'd borne the body out. A weird apartment, with a salon that had once been used for theosophy meetings and that Uncle Sidney had carved up into three bedrooms—each the size of a bath towel. But the wartime housing squeeze in New York was just easing. To find a vacant three-bedroom in Chelsea in 1951! A bedroom for us, a study for Jonathan, a room for . . . some other use.

Jonathan had to get his brother, Bernie, in Boston to wire the deposit, promising he could pay back ten or twenty a month. Jonathan said it was humiliating, borrowing money from his adenoidal little brother. I heard myself answering that he, too, could have been a neurologist. "Yeah, and you could have been a taxi dancer," he said. "Still could, if you lost a little weight." I laughed dutifully and didn't explain why I was gaining weight.

Was it time to tell? We could manage now, we had the money and the space, if Jonathan just happened to be interested in raising a baby. I didn't think at the time that the way to my baby's life had been cleared by a couple of deaths, some poor refugee at SLS and old Uncle Sidney. Only that the life was possible now, in a crude practical way. If Jonathan happened to be interested.

At Café Lucien we each had two martinis and a shrimp cocktail and a tossed salad with chunks of blue cheese the size of golf balls. Jonathan sprang for a bottle of wine, following what I would learn was his iron rule: order the *second* cheapest bottle on the list, so they won't think you're a tightwad. I was over my morning sickness, which Jonathan had never detected. Well, it mostly happened when I was at the office anyway. That evening I worked my way through an *Epicure*-sized repast without gastric incident, eating for (probably, not yet certainly) two and listening to Jonathan rattle on about politics—the Korean War, maybe, or whether Truman would run again next year, in which case we were positively going to vote for Norman Thomas.

I didn't suggest that perhaps I might exercise my franchise all by my little self. I just went on shoveling in the garlic bread, until at last the dread chateaubriand for two appeared, on a plank the size of my drawing table and surrounded by the annual agricultural output of New Jersey. I took one look and sprinted to the powder room. A false alarm, as it happened, I recovered as soon as the chateaubriand was out of sight, but I stayed in the powder room a minute or two, pressing a damp cloth to my forehead. The attendant gave me a hand towel, and I realized I'd left my handbag at the table. "Never mind, honey," she clucked. "You can catch me next time. When's the blessed event?"

I said, "April." As casually as that. Yet as I stepped out of the ladies' room, I had for the first time the sensation, not of being pregnant, but of being expectant.

Jonathan had vacuumed up his half of the steak and was starting an incursion on mine. He looked up and said, thoughtfully, "You okay?"

"I guess," I said. "I've had a little nausea lately. Off and on."

"Oh yeah?" he said, without interest. He chewed, looked around the room. His eyes widened almost imperceptibly. He swallowed. I nodded.

"Hm," Jonathan said. He gazed into the unlit fireplace for a while. Finally he said, "What the hell." He didn't go all misty, but at least he didn't mutter—as I had a few weeks earlier, sitting at my desk—"Oh shit." But then, weeks earlier, there hadn't been a job or an apartment.

My appetite returned. I polished off my half of the steak and its attendant produce so fast that Jonathan stared at me. Then he poured me the last of the claret, lit my cigarette, and said, "I guess maybe we ought to think about . . ." Even Jonathan recognized this was too brusque. He cleared his throat, took my hand, and said, "I want you to be my wife."

I finished my wine and took a drag of my cigarette—what innocent mothers we were back then! I had, amazingly, the presence of mind to ask: "What if I—will you want to be my husband if it turns out there's no baby?" I didn't specify how things might *turn out* that way.

Only in retrospect does it seem to me that I was turning Mickey into a test. What would I have done if Jonathan had failed to supply the right answer? As it was, he had to think a good while—still absently holding my hand.

"I will," he said. So unMickey became irrevocably Mickey. Or past my revocation, at any rate.

"I will," he said, and I said "I will," as if we were taking the vows right then. Perhaps we meant the words more, that evening at the Café Lucien, than when we—soberly—repeated them a week later at City Hall.

As the flames died down on the crêpes suzette, Jonathan leaned close and murmured, "You know, I've slept with a lot of people." It was 1951, I was just a girl fresh out of school, but I must have registered that the object of the preposition was rather . . . inclusive. Must have, because I can remember the word "people" fifty years later. In retrospect, I guess I am thankful he didn't say he'd slept with a lot of vertebrates. But then, what did I think of it then?

Not enough to hesitate. It was just a couple of years after the Kinsey Report, which suggested that many, many men had sometimes slept with "people." And we were in the Village, after all; a little catholic experimentation was almost mandatory in that not yet altogether sclerotic bohemia. I just shrugged, actually thought of offering a reassuring "me, too." I didn't, not just because it would have been a lie—unless two college boys plus Jonathan was a lot—but because somehow I already intuited that Jonathan's wish to subvert bourgeois norms did not imply any eagerness to repeal the double standard.

I shrugged; we dug into the crêpes suzette. Whatever he had been up to wouldn't matter, not when we were married and raising our child.

After we were done raising our child, and then done burying him, I took over Mickey's bedroom and drew pictures. Then Jonathan died, and I drew pictures.

Today I am drawing pictures of a dead daffodil. Something I have not shaken off.